

Studying psychology: The context of other disciplines

W. Ray Crozier & Neil Cooper

JOHAN RADFORD's stimulating article on psychology within higher education includes a paragraph on the context of psychology taught as a degree subject. He suggests that while statistics has an established presence on programmes and the discipline is increasingly informed by genetics, 'approaches to human behaviour such as anthropology, history, geography, politics, sociology, are relatively rare' (2008, p. 43). Radford argues that when these disciplines do form components of psychology degrees they tend to be available as minor or ancillary subjects. We have no data on the frequency with which these 'contextual' subjects are taught, or how they are included in programmes, but we would like to argue that psychology students should have opportunities to study other disciplines that have human behaviour as a primary concern. In doing so, we draw upon our experience of teaching psychology as a psychosocial science.

Exploring disciplines that border psychology

We hesitate to suggest changes to the core curriculum of psychology. Firstly, the degree as generally delivered continues to prove popular, as the number of programmes and applications for places show. Other disciplines may look enviously at the prosperity of psychology, where substantial cohorts of well-qualified students are recruited each year, making lectureship posts available and thereby helping to sustain scholarship. The requirement for British Psychological Society accreditation for staff-student ratios is supportive to psychology departments in this respect. Second, the syllabus for the Society's

Qualifying Examination provides an element of standardisation so that students, future employers and professional bodies can have a fairly clear idea of what graduates have covered in their degrees. Third, the curriculum, encompassing the five 'core areas' of the discipline, research methods, and (most recently), conceptual and historical issues is already demanding and difficult to fit into the three years of most degree courses (outside Scotland). Finally, were we to ask colleagues which disciplines would provide the most valuable context for psychology we would probably obtain a range of answers, some emphasising the biological leanings of psychology, some its social dimensions, some favouring critical or psychoanalytical approaches, and so on.

Yet we should acknowledge, and help our students to recognise that phenomena frequently conceived as 'psychological' are not the sole preserve of the discipline. We should provide insight into other fields which have distinct and distinguished perspectives on behaviour. The authors' experience has been of involving sociology, anthropology, economics and criminology with psychology, but we know that psychological issues are examined across disciplines from philosophy to biology. Most psychologists, we imagine, would readily see a role for other disciplines in the study of, say, the family, as this evidently has strong cultural and biological dimensions. Additionally scholars in other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology are increasingly interested in what we might think of as 'core' topics in psychology, for example, the self, personality, memory, the emotions, or child development (e.g. Redstone & Hodgkin, 2005; Rose, 1998;

Scott, 2007; Slee & Shute, 2003; Wierzbicka, 1999). There are therefore established and emergent areas of intersection; however, common ground also raises potential tensions as disciplines can adopt reciprocally critical views and be defensive about perceived encroachment into mainstream matters.

We suggest that if programmes are carefully planned the blending of psychology and other disciplines can be a valuable and stimulating learning experience for students and their teachers. In our Psychology degree at the University of East Anglia we cover core areas of psychology as specified in the Society Qualifying Examination curriculum but also incorporate optional modules on crime, the family, childhood, the self, and mental health that draw upon wide disciplinary fields. These options prove not only popular with students, but allow for the development of assignments in which psychological knowledge can be contextualised by and considered alongside other material. For example, assignments have challenged students to deliberate the appropriateness of the age of criminal responsibility, paternity leave and the role of contemporary fathers and the impact of spatial constraints on the experience of urban childhood. In addressing such issues students may utilise psychological research, but need to position it in such a way that it informs and is informed by research in sociology, social policy and geography.

What are the benefits of exploring bordering disciplines?

We can identify several benefits which students can reap if offered the opportunity to explore neighbouring fields of study:

- Students have a greater frame of reference: Students learn how other disciplines frame, investigate and evaluate issues and can deliberate how this compares with approaches within psychology.
- Students appreciate the strengths of psychology: if students only do psychology they will take it granted that it 'works'; learning psychological research

methods while comparing them with other methodological approaches opens a way to thinking about what is 'good' science.

- Students understand psychology better: Exposure to other ways of approaching issues allows students to develop a critical perspective on psychological perspectives, fostering the appraisal of the assumptions underpinning their own discipline.
- The understanding of applied psychology is enhanced: Students recognise that 'real life' problems are multifaceted, providing material from other fields facilitates their ability to articulate 'what works' for personal and social change and how psychology 'fits' into potential solutions.
- Students are better prepared for an increasingly interdisciplinary world: Psychology graduates who practise psychology or who work alongside other professionals in occupations that are not obviously psychological can apply their knowledge more effectively and explain their perspective more readily if they have an awareness of how colleagues educated in neighbouring disciplines view problems.

What are the risks of disciplinary exploration?

The above benefits accrue if cross-disciplinary exploration is prudently managed, but we accept that introducing other fields may carry risks:

- It is difficult to effectively introduce other disciplines into programmes that are already congested while ensuring that the BPS curriculum is adequately covered in both breadth and depth.
- The student learning experience can be fragmented and the representation of other disciplines can be merely tokenism.
- A superficial understanding of associated disciplines may be acquired so that concepts and approaches may be taken up in simplistic and unrefined forms.
- Development of a critical position on psychological knowledge may be uncomfortable

able, leading to ambiguity and confusion as students confront diverse strands of inquiry and explanatory frameworks.

The effective introduction of material which avoids a superficial approach needs to be managed. We draw upon opportunities within optional units that most, if not all, psychology degree programmes provide. What is essential, we believe, is, first that students are provided early in their course with a foundation for appreciating related disciplines and, second, that modules drawing upon these disciplines are effectively integrated into the programme. In our programme at UEA two first-year modules (*Psychosocial Theory* and *Self and Society*) provide an early encounter with other disciplines. Both modules are taken by all students to provide a foundation for more specialist options in the second and third years. Each unit is taught by a single lecturer, one with a first degree in anthropology and psychology and one with a first degree in psychosocial studies. Both lecturers are therefore comfortable in crossing boundaries and this removes the need to segment disciplinary ideas between two or more lecturers, although liaison between lectures from different disciplines who share the same educational ethos can be productive (e.g. see Widner & Davies, 2007). Disjointedness is further avoided by the majority of 'contextual' modules being taught by psychologists who have active research agendas embedded in a broad understanding of the social sciences.

The potential uncertainty and discomfort for students who are exposed to varying

perspectives already exists within psychology. As Frosh (2003, p. 1546) recognises, psychology is a broad discipline '...very fuzzy at the edges where it merges with sociology, biology, brain science and the humanities...'. Consequently, within our programme we have actively engaged with teaching strategies in tutorials and practicals which foster thinking about the tensions and commonalities within and between the BPS core curriculum areas. The exploration of interdisciplinary develops from this intradisciplinary discovery. As in the teaching of core areas, staff who deliver contextual modules should be members of the programme team to ensure that their contributions connect with those who provide primary material. If joint degrees or other arrangements are in place staff must seek opportunities to bridge disciplines and be sensitive to the student experience.

Our argument is not that all psychology degrees should be like this. Rather, it is to suggest that there should be space within psychology degrees to afford students opportunities to study disciplines associated to psychology whilst still covering the core elements of the discipline and completing a degree that confers eligibility for GBR. Quite how it is done will vary from one university to another. Could our degrees be more diverse that they are while warranting the title of a psychology degree?

Address for correspondence

Professor W.R. Crozier, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ.
E-mail: r.crozier@uea.ac.uk

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